

Jeremiah 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 11. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Hear the words of this covenant, and speak to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Cursed be the man who does not hear the words of this covenant that I commanded your fathers when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the iron furnace, saying, Listen to my voice, and do all that I command you.

So shall you be my people, and I will be your guard, that I may confirm the oath that I swore to your fathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, as at this day. Then I answered, So be it, Lord. And the Lord said to me, Proclaim all these words in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. Hear the words of this covenant, and do them. For I solemnly warned your fathers when I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, warning them persistently, even to this day, saying, Obey my voice. Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but everyone walked in the stubbornness of his evil heart. Therefore I brought upon them all the words of this covenant, which I commanded them to do, but they did not. Again the Lord said to me, A conspiracy exists among the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. They have turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers, who refused to hear my words. They have gone after other gods to serve them. The house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant that I made with their fathers. Therefore thus says the Lord, Behold, I am bringing disaster upon them, that they cannot escape. Though they cry to me, I will not listen to them. Then the cities of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem will go and cry to the gods to whom they made offerings, but they cannot save them in the time of their trouble. For your gods have become as many as your cities,

O Judah, and as many as the streets of Jerusalem are the altars you have set up to shame, altars to make offerings to Baal. Therefore do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble. What right has my beloved in my house when she has done many vile deeds? Can even sacrificial flesh avert your doom?

Can you then exult? The Lord once called you a green olive tree, beautiful with good fruit, but with the roar of a great tempest he will set fire to it, and its branches will be consumed.

[2 : 3 3] The Lord of hosts who planted you has decreed disaster against you because of the evil that the house of Israel and the house of Judah have done, provoking me to anger by making offerings to Baal. The Lord made it known to me, and I knew. Then you showed me their deeds. But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. I did not know it was against me they devised schemes, saying, Let us destroy the tree with its fruit. Let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more. But, O Lord of hosts, who judges righteously, who test the heart and the mind, let me see your vengeance upon them. For to you have I committed my cause. Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the men of Anathoth, who seek your life, and say, Do not prophesy in the name of the Lord, or you will die by our hand. Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, Behold, I will punish them. The young men shall die by the sword, their sons and their daughters shall die by famine, and none of them shall be left. For I will bring disaster upon the men of Anathoth, the year of their punishment. In Jeremiah chapter 11 the covenant comes into the foreground. As the early chapters of Jeremiah make plain, there were prevailing notions of the covenant in his day that fuelled presumption rather than faithfulness. Mere possession of circumcision, the law, the temple, and sacrifices gave Judah a mistaken sense of its immunity from the Lord's judgment. The opening of this chapter is reminiscent of Jeremiah chapter 7 and Jeremiah's temple sermon.

Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 21 to 26 read, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices and eat the flesh. For in the day that I brought them out of the land

of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices, but this command I gave them, Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people, and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you. But they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and the stubbornness of their evil hearts, and went backward and not forward. From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants, the prophets, to them day after day. Yet they did not listen to me or incline their ear, but stiffen their neck. They did worse than their fathers. In Jeremiah chapter 11, as in chapter 7, there are several recollections of the book of Deuteronomy in the language that is used, and also the theological emphases. For instance, this is one of the other occasions in scripture where the language of iron furnace is used, of Egypt. The most notable occurrence of this language is found in Deuteronomy chapter 4 verse 20, But the Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day.

Three oracles open the chapter, in verses 1-5, 6-8, and 9-13. These especially look back to the exodus and refer to the covenant. Not that long previously, Josiah's men had discovered the book of the law in the temple, and Josiah had led the people in a covenant ceremony in 2 Kings chapter 23 verses 1-3. Then the king sent, and all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem were gathered to him. And the king went up to the house of the Lord, and with him all the men of Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and the priests, and the prophets, all the people both small and great. And he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord. And the king stood by the pillar, and made a covenant before the Lord, to walk after the Lord, and to keep his commandments, and his testimonies, and his statutes with all his heart, and all his soul. To perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book, and all the people joined in the covenant. Some scholars have debated the relationship between the covenant that Jeremiah refers to here, and the covenant of Josiah. Jeremiah's covenant seems to be connected with the exodus from Egypt. But reading the account of 2 Kings, it should be clear that the covenant of Josiah was not a different covenant. It was a renewal of the covenant of the exodus, and more particularly, the covenant of the book of the law, the book of Deuteronomy, that they made as they entered into the land. Jeremiah is instructed to hear the words of the covenant, and to speak them to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The words of verses 3 to 5 are a praise see of the entire covenant statement. It has the form of Deuteronomy chapter 27 verses 15 to 26, and the curses there.

In verse 26 of that chapter, Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them, and all the people shall say Amen. The covenant emphasized the necessity of hearing and doing the word of the Lord over everything else. Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 3, Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.

[7 : 40] At the heart of the statement of verses 3 to 5 is the covenant formula, So shall you be my people, and I will be your God. The fulfilment of this promise would occur as Israel listened and obeyed. The formula is an important one. It is found at several points throughout scripture, but especially in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Exodus chapter 6 verse 7, I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. Leviticus chapter 26 verse 12, And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people. Ezekiel chapter 11 verses 19 to 20, The Lord here declares the covenant curse, summing up material of the book of Deuteronomy, a curse for which Jeremiah provides the Amen, and the curse is going to come to pass upon the people, as they have rejected the covenant. The second oracle, in verses 6 to 8, commissions Jeremiah to go out again.

Within it, the Lord stresses the covenant call to obey his voice, and the fact that persistently the people rejected his voice and turned away in their stubbornness. Time after time he warned them, but they refused to hear.

The third oracle of the chapter describes a conspiracy of rebellion of the people of Judah. They have willfully turned away from the Lord and after other gods. This is why the Lord is bringing a disaster that they cannot escape upon them. As the people would not listen to the voice of the Lord, in verse 14 they receive poetic justice. The Lord will not listen to the cries made on their behalf.

They refused to listen to his messengers, now he will refuse to listen to theirs. Jeremiah is once again forbidden from praying for them. Some of the fundamental images of the book of Jeremiah return at this point. Israel is the unfaithful bride of the Lord, presuming to have special rights in his house, yet having done so many vile deeds. Arboreal imagery reappears here.

Judah was once a fruitful olive tree, bearing much good fruit. However, now it is worthless and fit only to be burned. On account of their service of the Baals, the Lord is bringing judgment upon them.

[10:09] Walter Brueggemann writes, The entire unit of Jeremiah 11 verses 1 to 17 is a meditation on Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 4. The people must listen. When Israel does not listen, it rejects the one who summons, it violates its identity, and it must be destroyed. The covenant relation is decisive both for Israel's life with God and for Israel's life among the nations. That decisive relation is now about to be nullified. When it goes, everything goes. Israel is bereft of its partner and so is dangerously exposed to the nations. Only the covenant relation guarantees Israel among the nations. Without it, Israel is in acute jeopardy. The chapter ends with a prayer of Jeremiah and the Lord's response.

This is a complaint of the prophet, one of a number of such prayers in the book that have been called his confessions or his lamentations. The language he employs throughout is very reminiscent of that which we find in the Psalms. The image of the sacrificial lamb taken to the slaughter might remind us of Psalm 44 verses 11 and 22. You have made us like sheep for slaughter and have scattered us among the nations. Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long. We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. Even more famously, that language, along with the language of being cut off from the land of the living, is found in Isaiah chapter 53 verses 7 to 8 in Isaiah's famous prophecy of the suffering servant. He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth, like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away, and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. Jeremiah is often called the weeping prophet, and his work is filled with tears, with complaints, with dirges, and with lamentations. He is a traumatized and a suffering man. To borrow the language of Isaiah's prophecy, he is a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Once again, we should keep in mind that Jeremiah is not just a message bearer. He is one who personifies the suffering servant of Israel. He is one who personifies the true remnant. Here he is about to be caught in some scheme, of which he is totally ignorant, until the Lord brings it to his awareness. In Matthew chapter 13 verse 57, Jesus said,

A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household. Here Jeremiah's life is sought by people of his hometown of Anathoth, possibly members of priestly families. They wish to cut him off completely to ensure that no offspring of his remain. His name, they hope, will go unremembered. Jeremiah, like the psalmist in many places, commits justice to the Lord. He calls for the Lord to act in vengeance upon them, and the Lord responds with the assurance that those who sought to kill him and to wipe out his name would themselves die by the sword with their children. The Lord stands by the prophet Jeremiah and does not allow his word to be silenced. A question to consider. How does the prominence of the covenant within this chapter help us better to understand the role played by the prophet?

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